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Shining Lonely Stars? Career Patterns of Rural Texas Female Administrators

Dawn C. Wallin

This paper stems from research that examined the impact of the rural context upon the career patterns of women educational administrators in rural public school districts in the state of Texas. The study examined two pertinent issues for women in rural education: (a) the nature of rural communities and its relationship to female career paths in educational administration, and (b) barriers and supports faced by female administrators in the rural context. The purpose of this paper will be to outline the findings of the study in relation to the emergent issues for rural female administrators.

This paper stems from research that examined the impact of the rural context upon the career patterns of women educational administrators in rural public school districts in the state of Texas. The first strand of the conceptualization of the work struggled with the ambiguity of the nature of the “rural” context, since its meaning tends to vary with the perspective of the defining individual. Rural areas differ greatly from each other (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Jolly & Deloney, 1993; Stabler & Olfert, 1996), especially in terms of economic resources, community priorities and purpose, demographics, and political efficacy. In fact, rural communities exhibit characteristics ranging on a continuum of economic, social, and demographic growth or decline. However, despite variability among communities, research does address characteristics that are common in rural areas, such as higher unemployment, higher poverty, isolation, lack of job opportunities, lower education levels and depopulation (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Herzog, 1996; Hobbs, 1994; Maynard & Howley, 1997). Rural communities have differing capacities to address the diversity of issues they face, which makes generalizations about what is “typically rural” very difficult.

Rural schools “vary not only to the extent that they are small, but also according to the type of community in which they are located. It has often been observed that rural schools are more tightly connected to their local communities than urban schools are” (Gjelton, 1982, p. 2). In most cases, a

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sense of community ownership of the rural school is reinforced by the fact that very often, the rural school is the largest employer, claims the largest share of the local tax dollars, and is the location of most community events (Hobbs, 1994). In essence, the rural school becomes a symbol of community unity, community survival and community values. It is because of this recognition that much of the American literature on rural education has focused on the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, and its inequitable consequences for rural school divisions (Hodges, 2002; Reeves, 2003; Rural Community Trust, 2003).

Because of the strong attachment between the school and community, the administrator of a rural school must be “constantly aware of the community, its leaders, and its pressure points . . . The quality of leadership . . . must reflect a sensitivity to the community, tempered with sound educational decision-making” (Tagg, 1983, p. 4). The administrator must work to understand community attitudes and expectations, and to create a school program that meets the needs of the community (Tift, 1990). Prospective administrators must “understand their roles and the expectations placed on them which may be unique to the rural community. Rural communities, the challenges and issues facing them and the educational programs which exist are no more or less significant than their urban counterparts, but they are different” (Pickle & Parmley, 1986, p. 1).

Perhaps one of the greatest barriers to women in leadership roles in the rural context has been the view that “things have always been done this way and so they shall always be done this way,” especially when practices are patriarchal and promote stereotypical attitudes and androcentric ways of thinking (Reinhartz & King, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1989). Because economic and demographic forces have caused extensive changes to rural communities, this belief may no longer have as much force as it may once have had. The change may be evidenced by the fact that more rural women have entered the workforce in order to supplement or in fact supply the family income (Ghelfi, Comartie, Lahr, & Parker, 1993), so “traditional rural” ways of working have

begun to change. Centralization of institutions and services such as education and health care now force rural residents to travel to larger centers where they experience alternate ways of working. Additionally, the incorporation of technology and the Internet into rural areas means that rural areas are no longer isolated from experiencing a diversity of social attitudes.

The second strand of the conceptualization for the study examined the research that centers on the career development of women in educational administration. Much of the research on women in educational leadership focuses on six themes: (a) aspirations (McLeod & Young, 2001); (b) barriers/stressors (Funk, 1987; Schmuck, 1986); (c) selection, recruitment, retainment (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Wallin & Sackney, 2003); (d) socialization (Hudson & Williamson, 2001; Marshall, 1992; Mertz, 2000); (e) mentorship (Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 2000; Funk, Pankake, & Schroth, 2000), and; (f) succession (Ortiz, 2000; Wallin, 2001). Research suggests that women are receiving administrative positions in rural school divisions (McFadden & Smith, 2004; Wallin & Sackney, 2003), even though, as national and international trends suggest, their representation in school administration remains disproportionately low (Mertz, 2002; Skrla, Reyes & Sheurich, 2000). Of those women who do enter administrative positions, "many times the positions being filled by women are those that have a minimal power base because they are in smaller more rural school districts" (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. xxvii).

Because the rural context in education is unique, and because research does point to the fact that women are receiving administrative positions in rural school districts, it was the intent of this study to examine the impact of the rural context upon the career patterns of women administrators in rural public school divisions in Texas, USA. This paper includes descriptions of the career paths of women educational administrators and elaborates upon the barriers and supports for women in rural school districts in Texas. The paper concludes with illustrations of the emerging issues facing female administrators in rural areas.

Methodology

In Texas, school districts are classified on a scale ranging from major urban to rural. Factors such as size, growth rates, student economic status, and proximity to urban areas are used to determine the classification. Rural school districts in Texas are defined as those districts that either have a growth rate of less than 20% and the number of students in membership is between 300 and the state median, or the number of students in membership is less than 300. Of the 1220 public school districts in Texas in the 2002-

2003 school year, 422 (34%) were designated as rural school districts (Texas Education Agency, 2003). Rural schools comprised 9.3% of the total schools in the state (833/7733). The Texas Education Agency (TEA), which oversees education in the state, maintains an online database of all school districts and administrative personnel. This data base was used to identify the sample for the study. In total, the sample included 247 female administrators (195 principals; 4 assistant superintendents; 42 superintendents; 6 area superintendents). All of these female administrators were sent questionnaires that included questions related to community profiles, career paths, and barriers and supports. A total of 35% of the sample responded to the survey.

Gjelton's (1982) rural typology (based upon demographic, economic and social profiles) was used as a basis upon which a rural typology was adapted to suit contextual needs. Gjelton's typology was not used in its entirety, because it did not adequately address the diversity of the Texas rural context. In fact, communities in Texas could be found that could not be sorted into any of Gjelton's original five community types (Stable, Depressed, High Growth, Reborn or Isolated) because of the restrictions placed on community characteristics. Instead, communities were first sorted into three over-arching community nature types (Booming, Stable, and Depressed) in order to simplify the typology, yet allow for similarities and differences between communities. Interestingly, no Booming rural communities surfaced in the results of the study. From these types, community profiles were generated through a description of demographic, economic, and social variables that had been found in the literature to influence the characteristics of rural communities (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Gjelton, 1982; Herzog, 1996; Hobbs, 1994; Maynard & Howley, 1997).

Survey responses related to career were analyzed with chi-square procedures and independent t-tests. Nonparametric chi-square measures were utilized for the nominal categories of personal and district characteristics to test the hypothesis that row and column variables in crosstabulations were independent. A low significance value (typically below 0.05) indicated that there may be some relationship between the two variables. The nominal symmetrical measures of Cramer's V and Contingency Coefficient were used to indicate both the strength and significance of the relationship between the row and column variables of crosstabulations. Independent t-tests were conducted to determine whether or not significance differences occurred for variables related to career development/career patterns, barriers, and supports based on community nature (Stable or Depressed) and position (inschool administration or central office administration). The Levene's test was to test for equality of variances. Participants rated their levels of agreement with the

variables on a continuum from strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

After the surveys were returned, 20 female administrators who expressed an interest were interviewed to obtain qualitative data. The data from the open-ended portion of the questionnaire, and that of the interviews, were analyzed through the use of the computer software program entitled, "Atlas-ti," according to qualitative research guidelines (Moustakas, 1988; Strauss & Cortin, 1990; Tageson, 1982). Reductive analysis (the identifying, coding and categorizing of data into meaningful units) was used to identify themes and patterns from the data. These themes and quotations were then used to elaborate and contextualize the survey findings.

Findings

Career Development/Career Patterns

Position

Significant differences between women in inschool administration and central office positions were found for three career variables: (a) number of years in an administrative position ($p = 0.01$); (b) future career goals ($p = 0.02$), and; (c) number of students in the district ($p = 0.016$). The Cramer's V (0.450) and Contingency Coefficient (0.410) for the number of years in an administrative position indicated that there was a moderate relationship between that variable and career position. Not surprisingly, central office administrators were more likely to possess more years of administrative experience than inschool administrators. The majority of central office administrators (64.7%) in this study had between 6-15 years of administrative experience. In comparison, 75.7% of the inschool administrators had between 1 and 10 years of administrative experience.

For the second variable, a Cramer's V of 0.344 and a Contingency Coefficient of 0.325 suggested that there was only a moderate relationship between position and future goals. In fact, the greatest proportion of central office administrators (70.6%) wished to remain in their current positions, or were split equally (11.8%) into wanting to move further into upper administration or being unsure about their future career prospects. Inschool administrators were almost equal in proportion between those who wished to remain in their current position (41.5%) and those who wished to move into upper administration (40.0%). It is interesting to note that almost one-fifth (18.5%) of inschool administrators were unsure about their future career goals.

The third variable that was found to be significantly related to position was the number of students in the district. However, the Cramer's V value (0.383) and Contingency Coefficient value (0.357) suggested that the relationship was relatively weak. The greatest proportions of women in central office positions occurred in districts in which the number of students in a district was equal to or less than 300. This situation was reversed for women in inschool administration where the greatest proportion of female inschool administrators worked in districts with 300 or more students.

Community Nature

Three of the variables related to career development were found to be significantly related to community nature. Women in stable communities had significantly higher mean scores (2.33) for the variable, "women consider a wide variety of career options" ($p = 0.003$) than women in depressed communities (1.95).

The second variable of significance was found for the statement, "Gender plays a role in differences in administrative leadership" (0.017). The mean score of women in stable communities (2.51) was significantly lower than that of women in depressed communities (2.88). However, although the results suggested that women in stable communities had significantly lower levels of agreement for this variable than those in depressed communities, it should be noted that the mean of both groups ranged only moderately between disagreement and agreement.

The final variable that was related to community nature was whether or not a female educational administrator would recommend her district to other women interested in educational administration ($p = .04$). However, a Cramer's V value of 0.226 and the Contingency Coefficient value of 0.220 suggested that the relationship between community nature and recommendation was fairly weak. In fact, although the majority of women in both stable and depressed communities recommended their communities to other women interested in educational administration, women in depressed communities were somewhat less likely to make that recommendation.

Career Path

One of the most intriguing comments made by 9 of the 20 administrators interviewed was that they were either the first ever (or the first of about 3) females hired in the district, or they were currently the only female working in administration in their districts. This same phenomena was mentioned by four of the superintendents. Many of the interviewees suggested that although the numbers of women in educational administration was still not representative, they had seen an increase in the number of women

administrators overall, although this increase was found more often in elementary principalships. Comments indicated that the representation of women in educational administration varied highly across educational regions. Overall, however, women indicated that there were still few women in superintendencies, and even fewer minority women in superintendencies.

The majority of administrators in this study had traditional career paths. Most of these women began their careers as teachers, and moved into the principalship after working in a variety of positions in which they were able to showcase leadership talent: (a) head/coordinator of Special Education; (b) programs and assessment coordinator; (c) instructional strategist; (d) technology coordinator, and; (e) consultants. Respondents seemed to have a great variety of positions open to them prior to becoming a principal. One of the less traditional avenues opened for a woman who combined being a grant writer for a school district with being a stay at home mom. Another administrator began her career as a coordinator of advanced placement for a county before acquiring the principalship. Only three interviewees had moved into assistant principalships, for the simple reason that most schools did not have an assistant principal's position.

The path to the superintendency was similar in most respects to that of the principalship, with the addition of a number of central office positions or positions of responsibility outside of the school district at either the regional service center or university. Such positions included: (a) director of curriculum/instruction; (b) counselor/diagnostician; (c) special education director; (d) educational service center trainer; (e) university instructor; (f) English as a Second Language director, and; (g) executive director of elementary operations and special programs. Only one interviewee indicated that she had never been a campus principal. Curiously, none of the interviewees had been secondary principals. Additionally, one of the interviewees was currently the campus principal and the superintendent, and therefore assumed the legal responsibilities of both positions.

Most of the respondents, including superintendents, indicated that obtaining a high school principalship was difficult because the expectations of the position remained biased against women, especially in terms of physical stature, and notions regarding discipline and athletics:

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me, "You don't look like a principal" I think I could probably at least buy a new car, maybe more. And being in the high school there were many raised eyebrows and thoughts of, "Can she handle the discipline of the high school kids? Can she deal with the parents of the athletes, and how will she look at athletics different than a male counterpart would look at athletics?" Would she see the same values that we see in athletics? I think it was much more at the high school level.

At the elementary level, I think still the majority of time people look to an elementary principal, especially in a smaller community, as still being somewhat of a nurturer for the younger children. So they accept a female in that role a lot easier than at the high school level.

It was also mentioned by participants that the inequitable practice of not hiring females for secondary principalships in Texas hindered women's ability to garner higher salaries and achieve positions in larger districts. This practice further detracted from equitable gender representation in the superintendency.

Almost all of the administrators indicated that they had assumed more than their share of responsibilities during their career progression as rural administrators. Many women mentioned that because most rural schools did not have assistant positions, the principals/superintendents were required to assume all of the professional responsibilities themselves—special education consultant, Education as a Second Language consultant, behavioral consultant, and Title I responsibilities. One principal had to assume the secretarial duties of the school. Another group stated that they had at times taken on the responsibilities of caretaker, plumber, concrete mixer, and carpenter. Even more extreme was the comment made by one of the superintendents that “once it was mentioned that [the community] wanted to have a volunteer fire department and maybe I could get that going . . . that's a little more than I can do.” Needless to say, this superintendent decided to opt out of that responsibility.

Mobility

A number of respondents worked in or very near to rural communities in which they grew up. These individuals had vested interests both personally and professionally in the rural communities in which they worked. Not surprisingly, the most common cited reasons for these decisions were investments in property, homes, children's education, proximity to family, and/or a husband who was tied to the land. Some of the principals mentioned that they were willing to drive some distance from their home if a position were to open, but residency requirements that stipulated that administrators had to live within the geographical confines of the district stopped them from applying.

Many principals stated that their upward career mobility had been fostered more quickly than it would have been if they had been in a large district, because, “in a small district you get to know people in a very short time. Everybody knows everyone and they see what you're capable of, and I have had absolutely no problem achieving my professional goals in the

district.” However, the lack of diversity and/or number of administrative positions in rural areas could become a hindrance. As one woman mentioned somewhat ironically, she would have liked to become the superintendent of the district, but that would not happen since the superintendent was her husband. Another woman indicated that unless the superintendent in the district “dropped dead of a heart attack,” there was not likely to be much administrative movement in her district, since his position was the only central office position available.

Superintendents were more conscious of the fact that movement depended on the board’s willingness to have them remain in the district. These women had thought through the impact that such a reality might have on their personal relationships, even though they were committed to their positions. Although many of the superintendents had husbands and children which tied them to place, they recognized that a willingness to move and an open mind were assets to their career progression.

Career Aspirations

As far as career aspirations were concerned, the majority of principals in the study indicated that even if they did move into upper administration, they were not interested in the superintendency. In fact, only two respondents in the interviews mentioned the superintendency as their career position of choice. Both of these women indicated that it was not the “right time” for them to take on the responsibilities of the position given their current personal lives, and one of the respondents wondered if she ever would move in to the superintendency given what she perceived to be the high level of accountability of the position combined with very little personal control.

Becoming an assistant superintendent was more often desired by principals, as was teaching at the collegiate level. Other positions sought included work at a regional service center, going back into teaching to be near family, and starting up one’s own school. Overall, however, the majority of principals interviewed wished to remain in their position—for now—because they were comfortable with where they were socially, professionally and personally. Interestingly, however, most of those same principals were working on, or indicated that they were going to work on, superintendency certification “just in case.”

For the most part, central office administrators indicated that they were happy with their positions. In general, these women indicated that if they were to move, they would attempt to gain positions in larger school districts either as an assistant superintendent or superintendent, especially in order to increase their retirement salaries. However, these women were grateful for the opportunity to learn about the superintendency in a small rural setting,

and their primary concern about leaving was that they would potentially lose out on the “closeness that is out there, the rewards” if and when they moved to a larger setting.

Barriers in Educational Administration

There were no significant differences in any of the barrier variables between women in inschool administration and women in central office positions. However, there was a significant difference between women in stable and depressed communities for the barrier, “Female administrators with children are perceived to be less capable of performing their administrative duties” ($p = .029$). The mean score of women in stable communities (2.18) was significantly lower than that of women in depressed communities (2.51), although the mean scores of both groups fell in the middle range of agreement for this variable.

Hiring and Selection

Although the administrators in this study spoke from a privileged position in that they had achieved administrative positions, the hiring and selection context needs to be highlighted because of its potential impact on female administrative career patterns. Almost all of the respondents indicated that males were generally hired before females except when districts wanted to ensure a gender balance in school administration. Many of the respondents indicated that they had interviewed in situations where they were the only short-listed female. Another commonly mentioned hiring/selection factor concerned the nature of discipline, physical stature, and/or perceptions about women and athletics, especially at the high school level. One respondent’s experience highlights the issue the best:

I had one farmer who sat there the whole night when I was interviewed and he didn’t ask any questions. He just doodled. He had his overalls on . . . Near the end the superintendent looked over and said, “John, you haven’t asked [candidate] any questions.” He said, “Well, that all sounds real good to me and if you all like her, that’s fine, but I want to ask one question.” I knew it was coming. He said, “Ms. [Candidate] have you ever paddled a kid?” I said, “Yes, sir, I have.” And he said, “You have any reservations about paddling these kids around here?” I said, “Not if the board will back me.” He said, “Good, I don’t want some panty waist coming in here watering down the discipline that we’ve worked so hard to create.”

This principal stated that she eventually had a rather good working relationship with this board member.

Inequitable Treatment

Many of the respondents relayed instances of inequitable treatment that was due more to their gender than to their abilities. This included such things as being granted more administrative tasks than males, being held accountable for “paperwork” when male administrators were not reprimanded for their refusal to complete it, and being deliberately isolated from discussions with male colleagues until “the guys really need something, especially knowledge about something.” Other responses included: (a) the provision of secretaries to male administrators only; (b) male colleagues taking credit for their work; (c) being told they could not accept phone calls from their husbands while at work; (d) male teachers or school board members refusing to “answer to a woman,” and (e) inequitable salaries between male and female administrators or between rural and larger districts.

Three principals spoke of the resistance they felt from other females. As one woman stated, “women do not support each other. The issue of ‘jealousy’ for lack of a better word, is hindering career development. Women are socialized to ‘compete’ with other females—men are socialized as ‘team players.’” Two women—one a principal and one a superintendent—indicated that because the district had only hired one unsuccessful female administrator in the past, the district had effectively labeled the entire gender incompetent. Not surprisingly, these women felt they had become symbols for women’s competency and felt the pressure of intense scrutiny from others in the district. In the end, most of these women believed they had to work harder and smarter in order to prove themselves worthy of an administrative position. Some women alluded to a sense of betrayal when all their hard work in the community seemed not to be recognized.

Good Old Boys Club

Almost all participants indicated that the “Good Old Boys Club” in Texas was alive and well. Although frustrated by its presence, most of the administrators accepted the fact that the network existed and tried to use The Club to their advantage. One of the principals spoke of “breaking in” to this club during her university classes. She became a sought-after work partner of the men because of her abilities, so she built relationships with these men who then became leverages into administration. A second woman spoke of her involvement in the Rotary club of which she was the only female member. She indicated that her involvement with this group allowed her to network with some of the “good old boys,” who then helped her and her school. She was astute enough to notice that the same help was not extended to two other female administrators who worked in the same district but who had not built a relationship with the “Good Old Boys.”

Perhaps the most explicit example of how the “game” was played is outlined by the following comment:

I’m a woman in a small rural school that had a school board that was all male: good old boys, ranchers, cattlemen . . . yes! Especially when I heard that they were not pleased when they heard that there was a woman candidate for the principal’s job. I never said anything to the superintendent that that was illegal, but I could have gone and been real ugly. I found real quick a lesson learned. I hate politics, but I learned real well to play the game. What you do is, I think it was Boleman and Deal, “Survey the landscape.” and get to know them individually. I learned to talk cattle and hay. I learned to draw from my experience growing up with a grandfather who was a rancher. I had to find something that I connected with. There was some intimidation there because a lot of these guys do not have a college education. They’re high school graduates and here I am working on my doctorate. I had to make certain that I didn’t come across as arrogant or condescending. I put on a little southern girl charm and built that relationship up. It’s OK. I’m still a woman but I’m accepted.

Of course, not all women had these kinds of explicit experiences, and a number indicated that the context was getting better for women in administration. However, none of the administrators assumed that the path was completely rosy and free from barriers related to gender.

Supports for Women in Educational Administration

There were significant differences by both community nature and position for the support, “Access to mentorship programs exists.” The mean level of agreement of women in stable communities (2.76) was significantly higher than that of women in depressed communities (2.41) ($p = 0.02$). As well, significant differences were found between women in inschool administration (2.52) and central office administration (2.81) ($p = 0.033$).

In almost all cases, administrators indicated that their husbands, children and parents were their primary personal supports. Perhaps one of the most moving instances of the kind of support a father gave his daughter was mentioned by one of the principals:

Neither one of my parents had an education. My father had a fifth grade education and my mother had a tenth grade education. My father always told me that education was power. He lifted up his heavy, 50 pound toolbox and he said, “This is what I do for a living. I crawl around other people’s hot attics and behind dirty washers and refrigerators and stoves because I don’t have an education. I don’t want this for you. I want you to work in an office where it’s air conditioned and people look up to you and they respect

you for what you do. You won't get that without an education." So if we didn't go to school, we didn't go outside to play that day. And when you went to school, you didn't shame your family. My father and my mother gave me a very strong motivation to go to school. My sister and I were the first two in our family's generations to have completed high school.

Finally, most of the administrators mentioned that their faith was a continuing personal support for them.

In terms of professional supports, most women mentioned particular mentors or administrative teams (both within and outside the district) that they could count on to provide advice. Other commonly cited supports included teachers/employees, the district/division school board, and professional organizations. However these women indicated that travel distance, reduced staff development budgets and time away from the school significantly hindered the opportunity and the desire to become involved in those groups. A number of administrators cited graduate student networks and university faculty as professional supports. One of the superintendents mentioned a mentorship program for new superintendents organized by the Texas Association of School Administrators. Finally, although the support from educational service centers was mentioned by four interviewees, the most commonly cited support for all interviewees was district superintendents who had encouraged ideas and provided the support necessary for them to achieve many of their leadership goals.

Emerging Issues

The final section includes a discussion of the findings in relation to emerging issues.

Community Nature

Although women in both types of communities were likely to recommend their communities to other women interested in educational administration, women in depressed communities were less apt than those in stable communities to make this recommendation. Based on the data it may be that women in depressed communities find that the extra responsibilities of leadership that exist because of less staff positions, lower budgets, and very small support bases make the position so demanding that some women reconsider whether the rewards of the position are worth the tremendous amount of professional and personal effort necessary.

Women in stable communities had significantly higher levels of agreement than women in depressed communities for the ideas that: (a) women consider a wide variety of career options; (b) gender plays a role

in differences in administrative leadership, and; (c) access to mentorship programs exists. Perhaps the smaller size of depressed communities typically also includes a smaller variety of services (and therefore career options) may play a role in shaping the career development of women. The fact that gender differences in leadership seems to play a smaller role in depressed communities might be explained by the fact that school districts in depressed communities have a difficult time attracting and retaining administrators of either gender, and therefore the differences between males and females are minimized for the sake of finding a competent person. Women in depressed communities had significantly higher levels of agreement about the notion that female administrators with children are perceived to be less capable of performing their administrative duties. This finding might be explained in two potential ways. It may be that individuals in depressed communities hold more conservative ideas about gender roles and motherhood. Alternatively, because of the lack of anonymity in very small communities, community members are more aware of the personal commitments (including motherhood) of female administrators and therefore might be more apt to focus on those aspects than people in larger communities where the anonymity of the administrator's personal life is somewhat more protected.

Position

The responses of inschool administrators were significantly different from those of central office personnel for the variables: (a) number of years in administration; (b) future goals, and; (c) number of students in the district. Not surprisingly, central office administrators were more likely to possess more years of administrative experience than were inschool administrators. As far as future goals were concerned, the greatest proportion of central office administrators wished to remain in their current positions, or were split equally into wanting to move further into upper administration or being unsure about their future career prospects. Inschool administrators were almost equal in proportion between those who wished to remain in their current position and those who wished to move into upper administration. Making the break away from working directly with children was a commonly cited reason for the ambiguity in their desire to move into central office positions, as was a decrease in the attractiveness of the superintendency. In terms of student enrollment, the greatest proportions of women in central office positions occurred in districts where the number of students in a district was equal to or less than 300. This situation was reversed for women in inschool administration where the greatest proportion of female inschool administrators worked in districts with 300 or more students. This phenomena might be explained by the fact that there were fewer districts in

general with enrollments of less than 300, but that women were more apt to acquire central office positions in these districts because they are less attractive for males (financially and in prestige) than larger districts.

Finally, inschool administrators had significantly lower levels of agreement than central office administrators for the idea that access to mentorship programs exists. This is somewhat perplexing, since literature and programming has espoused the benefits of mentoring in school districts. However, perhaps the distance between schools and inschool administrators' desire to remain at the school play a role in mentor program access. Superintendents may be more apt to indicate that support programs in their districts are available, even if in reality they are not functioning at optimal levels. It may also be that the pre-occupation with the revolving door superintendencies in the state of Texas has drawn attention to the need for support programs at the superintendent level more than at the school level.

Intersection of Context and Career

Some of the realities of living in a rural community impacted the work of administrators. Administrators indicated that financial restraints based on decreasing enrollments, and declining populations had forced many districts to reduce staff development opportunities, cut positions and increase the responsibility loads of administrators, which leads to greater feelings of isolation and stress on the administrator (especially when the positions cut were support positions like that of assistant principal or assistant director). Many districts had difficulties retaining administrators because they could not pay equitable salaries.

Geographical isolation from resources or facilities for professional development/higher learning were causes for concern in rural areas, since professional credentials were desired and required (in terms of certification) for Texas administrators. The time, distance and financial resources necessary for administrators to access them were very demanding. Rural female administrators, especially inschool administrators, more often than not elected to remain on their campuses "taking care" of the students and staff. This has major ramifications for the skill level and quality of administrators in rural areas.

Texas administrators were faced with high mobility rates, high poverty rates within the community (or at least segments of the community), and cultural and/or language issues. It becomes necessary to develop supports to help administrators deal with communities in flux, since their role as administrator puts them at the forefront of issues that trickle into the lives of the children in school.

“Life in a fishbowl” was a consistent metaphor utilized by rural administrators, although it was not always referred to negatively. The stresses of being a public role model were often balanced by the care and concern offered by the community in times of need. The lines between professional and personal identities blurred in rural communities. Many single female administrators had to either leave the community on weekends or be able to live with the idea that their personal lives would become the community’s coffee conversation. Perhaps the issue is that female administrators in rural contexts need to have some links—social and professional—to a world outside of their work community. Since these women indicated that they did not want to leave the community for professional development, it would likely follow that neither would they want to leave the community to attend mentorship meetings across the state. Perhaps online learning technologies that incorporated interactive networking with professional development is a potential way to address the issue, especially if it included some focus on women’s issues in administration. Unfortunately, the discrepancies in technology access, availability, usage and maintenance make this a major undertaking for rural districts.

The data suggest that there was high variability in the representation of female administrators in Texas. A closer examination of regional differences may help to illuminate some of the gender discrepancies found in the representation of women in educational administration. Women do seem to be gaining administrative positions in principalships across the state, but not equitably in the high school principalship nor the superintendency. Women in central office positions are more highly represented in very small rural districts and report that they have a difficult time “breaking in” to larger districts. It is proposed that positions in depressed communities are not as attractive to males as they once were, because responsibilities are high, school closure may be an imminent possibility, and fewer opportunities for advancement exist. Instead, males, who are more mobile in general, are more apt to access positions in communities that are able to provide more activities and more resources. Quite simply, the greater competition for positions in stable communities might ensure that gender inequities are in fact fostered.

In general, females followed traditional career paths and most often found themselves in an elementary principalship. The high school principalship is still hallowed ground upon which few women are invited to tread. It appears to be easier for a woman to move into a central office position than it is for her to become a high school principal. Notions of physical size, perceptions about discipline and athletics still epitomize the stereotype of the high school principal. Some central office interviewees indicated that this inequity ultimately transferred into their search for

superintendencies in larger districts, since many school boards used their lack of experience in the high school principalship to justify not hiring them.

There is a growing aversion to the position of superintendent for many Texas principals. Work needs to be done with school divisions, communities, school boards and professional organizations to alleviate this negativity. Based on the comments made by the interviewees, it is not surprising that Texas is having difficulty finding rural superintendents, or at least keeping them for any length of time, because of the staggering breadth of responsibility and level of personal accountability these people face.

Neither inschool administrators nor central office administrators have access to a collective bargaining unit, since collective bargaining is illegal in the state of Texas. However, that reality may have a negative impact upon female administrators, especially in terms of equitable benefits and salary, contract issues, and grievances. There is no legalized collective bargaining voice for female administrators in Texas that offers them a platform for addressing their concerns. Inequities can occur when contracts are negotiated individually and yearly.

Notions of gender inequity and tokenism exist in the Texas context, and the Good Old Boys Club seems to be thriving in a variety of rural areas. Texas interviewees spoke openly about the methods they used to subvert or to use the power of the Good Old Boys Club to their advantage. Overall, women recognized that The Club existed, but they generally tried to work around or with its influence rather than aggressively confront it.

In conclusion, the administrators indicated that they worked within constraints, and dealt with incredible challenges in contexts that were not always facilitative or inviting. At times, the role model responsibility, isolation of the position, and sometimes personal loneliness gave these rural women in the Lone Star State cause for concern:

Aren't we all like lonely stars
Separated from others by empty space
Occasionally, one unforgettable relation comes
Only to be gone in the blinking of an eye. (Anonymous)

These women became the shining stars of their rural districts because of their hard work, dedication to children, and emphasis on service and support to the community. Their legacy will be to shine the way for more women to enter a field which is still highly unrepresentative of the gendered and ethnic diversity found in the state of Texas.

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